DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 536 CS 213 927

AUTHOR Andres, Sophia
TITLE Images Bridging Home and Academic Cultures.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; *Educational Environment; *Family Environment; Higher Education; *Imagery; Literature Appreciation; Metaphors; Student Experience; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Often students are unable to draw upon their personal worlds and individual experiences to enrich their writing, suggesting a disparity between home and academic cultures. In light of this apparent disparity, teachers must try to bridge the gap, a task that is possible when the teacher focuses on the germinal, emotional, and unifying qualities of images. The testimonies of numerous writers point out the powerful influence that a single image can be capable of producing, often becoming the germ of a story or novel. Images also capture, convey, and communicate emotions. Beginning with images from their own experiences, students can become the receptive and diffusive centers of concentric, ever-widening circles of cultural awareness. Specific kinds of assignments can encourage students to evoke images from their own experiences. Students can be asked to understand how the images of a story express the writer's or the character's emotional state. Excerpts from student papers show that they respond readily when asked about a story's images. Students should be challenged to center an entire written piece around an image chosen by them. A central image of a literary text can be studied in its relation to the entire text. By asking students to evoke images as the origins and centers of writing ranging from personal experience to argument, they are inspired to cultivate their voice and originality. (HB)

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Sophia Andres
University of Texas of the Permian Basin
Department of English
Odessa, TX 79762-0001

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Sophia Andres
University of Texas of the Permian Basin
Department of English
Odessa, TX 79762-0001

Images Bridging Home and Academic Cultures

Until recently, when I realized I could transfer the results of my research on creativity to my Composition courses, I suffered from unsettling doubts (as perhaps many others in my profession) whenever my thoughts about these courses seemed to revolve around one problem in particular: the inability of students to draw from the wealth of their own experience to enrich their assignments ranging from the personal experience to the critical and argumentative essays. Perceiving academic and home cultures as two disparate, unrelated, and, at times, conflicting worlds, students seem often incapable of relating their own experiences to the academic world. Mary Poovey addresses this problem in her article "Cultural Criticism Past and Present" (College English 52 (1990): 615-25) when she refers to the relevance of our teaching to students' experiences:

> for most of our undergraduates, the experience of MTV, television, and rock and roll constitutes an important part of the training they have received in how to read before they enter our classrooms. To ignore this and teach only close readings of texts that we present as static and centered is to risk making institutionalized education seem even more irrelevant to our students' past experiences and extra-curricular lives than I suspect it already feels" (616).

Unfortunately, Mary Poovey's valuable observations remain theoretical and philosophical even at the end of her article.

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Shirley Brice Heath in Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms (New York: Cambridge UP, 1983) addresses the problem from a different perspective when she claims that students' performance often depends on the acceptance of student culture by the mainstream schools. Similarly, James Cummins ("Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Invention," Harvard Educational Review 56 (1986): 18-36) emphasizes that "widespread school failure does not occur in minority groups that... do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and are not alienated from their own cultural values" (22). Yet these writers do not offer specific suggestions for bridging academic and home cultures, a task which I will undertake in this essay by focusing on the germinal, emotional, and unifying qualities of images.

In the last few years, I have become increasingly aware of the ways we can enable students to become the receptive and diffusive centers of concentric ever-widening circles of cultural awareness by cultivating their imagination and thus stimulating their authenticity. But before I introduce specific assignments which encourage students to evoke images from their own experience, I would like to discuss briefly the shaping power that a single image can have on both the pretextual and textual levels. Pretextually an image can function as an inspiration, an origin. The testimonies of such diverse writers as S.T. Coleridge, George Eliot, Henry James, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and

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Amy Tan about their own process of composition point to a vivid visual impression they have had as the origin of their artistic creation. In his Notebooks and Prefaces to his novels, Henry James, for instance, very often tries to retrace and reconstruct the germ of his novels, which most often originates in an image. In his account of the germ for The Ambassadors, for example, James emphasizes its visual quality: "but I mention these slightly irrelevant things only to show that I saw the scene of my young friend's anecdote." In the case of The Portrait of a Lady "the image en disponibilité" is charged with a germinal property (The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James. Ed. Richard Blackmur. New York. Scribner's, 1934. 44, 99) Quite frequently in his Notebooks, he often begins with an idea and waits for an image to give it substance, as is the case, for instance, with The Other House: "the thing can only be, like The Private Life, impressionistic... I must think it over a little more and perhaps something more in the nature of an image--as in The Portrait of a Lady--will come out to me" (The Notebooks of Henry James. Ed. F.O. Matthiessen & Kenneth Kurdock. New York: Oxford UP, 1947. 144). On other occasions, as in the composition of The American, an image confirms the conception of a work giving it clarity and completeness; once the image appears, any doubts about the conception dissolve: "I have, I confess, no memory of a disturbing doubt; once the man himself was imaged to me (and that germination is a process almost

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always untraceable) he [Christopher Newman] must have walked into the situation as by having a pass-key from his pocket" (The Art of the Novel, 23-24).

Contemporary writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Amy Tan also see an image as the germ or origin of their novels. In his introduction to Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison refers to a poster he saw in a Vermont village, announcing the performance of a "Tom Show," "that forgotten term for blackface minstrel versions of Mrs Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin" (New York: Vintage Books, 1972. xiii). The image of the poster acted as a unifying principle bringing together diffuse ideas about the novel; "things once obscure, odd things, unexpected things," Ellison says, "began falling into place" (xiii). Relating her experience of the germ for her recent novel Beloved, Toni Morrison also speaks of an image. While editing The Black Book, a large collection of memorabilia, she recalls, she came across a magazine of the 1850s in which she read an interview with a slave woman named Margaret Garner: "There was a drawing of the woman," Toni Morrison recounts. "She looked quiet, serene--not shy or steady. I wondered what was really in her head. And I read a description of the event--how she had come from Kentucky, run away with her four children to Cincinnati, Ohio, a free state. It was very important to me," Morrison emphasizes, "to picture it all, make it my own property as far as my imagination was concerned" (Silverman, Al. "A

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Talk with Toni Morrison." "The Book of the Month Club News," 1987).

In a presentation at San Jose State University, her alma mater, Amy Tan recalled the influence of a former teacher, Franklin Rogers, who required only one book, The Scarlet Letter, in his 1972 English Honors class, and trained his students all semester long to visualize the images of that novel. "All this came back to me when I started to write fiction in 1985," Amy Tan recounted and emphasized that she still remembered the images in Scarlet Letter. And later on she continued with one of the germs for the Joy Luck Club: "One of the strongest images that came to me were those twin baby girls. I had once seen twin Chinese girls running and laughing across a parking lot and I was so struck by that image of their double laughter that I wondered about their double tears, double hope, double joy and double tragedy" (San Jose State University Digest 8 (1991): 8)

Indeed the testimonies of these writers, to name but a few, point to a vivid, visual impression as the origin of artistic creation. Furthermore, a close reading of these literary artists' works reveals that the germinal image, a perceptual, aesthetic, or imaginary experience invariably acts as the unifying principle or center of their entire compositions. Recently, in a brilliant account of American literary history, Occidental Ideographs: Image, Sequence, and Literary History (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1991),

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Franklin Rogers explores in detail the germinal, unifying qualities of images in nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature.

But besides generating other images and unifying compositions, images capture, convey, and communicate emotions. Indeed this is a significant quality that often has been overlooked in studies on images. George Eliot best expresses that quality in her "Notes on Form in Art" when she says that in literary compositions "the choice and sequence of images are more or less not determined by emotion but intended to express it" (434-35). (The Essays of George Eliot. Ed. Thomas Pinney. London: Routledge and Kegan Pual, 1963). Throughout her essays, notebooks, and journals George Eliot's ideas on the creative process center on images, the vehicles of the emotions she experienced while composing her literary works and the means through which she attempts to convey those emotions to her readers.

While I agree with Gaston Bachelard (The Poetics of Space. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) that not all images are metaphors (74-75), it is often difficult to see images isolated from a metaphoric context. My definition of image is very close to Mervyn Nicholson's in his recent article entitled "Reading Stevens' Riddles" (College English 50 (1988): 13-30) In this particular essay, he defines image not as a "symbol" or a "semiotic sign," but rather as "an act, the act of visualization" (13), and goes on to say that the "means by which the image-

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thinking activity works is metaphor" (14). Often but not always articulated in metaphors, images are effective in dealing with experiences not expressed by common language, and particularly in describing nuances of emotion. In The Language Poets Use (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), Winifred Nowottny emphasizes, "the world of private emotion is in particular need of metaphor because the vocabulary of emotion is comparatively little developed" (60-62). R. A. Foakes in The Romantic Assertion (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1971) speaks of metaphor as "the intensification of feeling" (27-28). Paul Ricoeur in the Rule of Metaphor (Trans. Paul Czarny. Toronto: U.of Toronto P., 1977) points out that "in symbolizing one situation by means of another, metaphor 'infuses' the feelings attached to the symbolizing situation into the heart of the situation symbolized" (190). In the same work Ricoeur discusses the generative, fertile, holistic quality of metaphor concluding with the question: "If metaphor engenders thought through a long discourse, is this not because it is itself a brief discourse?" (188).

What I find directly relevant to our teaching of composition courses is S.T. Coleridge's statement that metaphors are "not borrowed from poets, but adopted by them. Out commonest people, when excited by passion, constantly employ them" (Shakespearean Criticism. Ed. Thomas M. Raysor, 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1930. 2:121). Connecting metaphor or image to emotion Coleridge shows us the way to invention and creation.

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Indeed by beginning with images from their own experience students can become the receptive and diffusive centers of concentric ever widening circles of cultural awareness. In brief and lengthy assignments, in personal experience as well as argumentative essays, the image can be a viable vehicle in generating other images and ideas. In the prewriting phase, an image can become the nucleus of clustering (discussed extensively by Gabriele Rico in Writing the Natural Way. Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1983), eliciting other images; in the composing phase, an image can serve as the center of composition. An assignment can begin by providing students with an image or a metaphor. Take for instance the image of a web as a means of articulating an entangling, painful experience. This is how one student responded to an in-class brief (twenty minutes) writing assignment:

> A web is like a fence. It keeps you out or holds you in. It is transparent but impenetrable. As a fly who struggles in a spider's web, so you struggle too. You struggle to get free of the ties and bonds that hold you down, the commitments to others that sap your strength and energy. You lie trapped and struggling within the confines of those demands you are trying to meet. Then somehow the other person who once shared your web breaks free of those bonds and ties and is now free to go off to explore the rest of the world. But because of the web, you cannot reach out and join him and, like that fly, can only watch as you become wrapped tighter and tighter into the strands of the web. Resentment rises within you for the other person's freedom, resentment that he has left you behind to face the web alone, resentment that cannot be blamed on those for whom you have bound yourself, your family, but the resentment is there and like the ugly fangs of the hungry spider, it causes a deep pain upon its infection and once more you struggle to free yourself from the web.

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The connection between literature and the students' own experience can be effected through images also, not only by encouraging students to visualize the literary texts they read but by showing them how the images of a story express the writer's or the characters' feelings. By cultivating their ability to see a story as a writer's attempt to communicate the feelings s/he experienced on a given situation, we can help them understand how to construct images in order to convey their own feelings. Consider, for instance, John Berry's "The Listener," a story about a violinist, Rudolf, who, stranded by a storm, spends the night in a lighthouse with the lighthouse keeper who has lived there all his life, and inspired by the lighthouse keeper's hospitality, with the storm as an accompanist, gives his most exquisite performance of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. After reading the story and encouraging students to describe the most vivid images they remember, I ask them to write an essay about the art of listening. Here are excerpts from a student's paper inspired by the images of "The Listener":

> The art of listening is much like the interplay between a lighthouse and a passing ship.... When a lighthouse sends a solitary beam of light through a raging storm to a big ship, the lighthouse is sending some very valuable information. From this flash of light, the captain of the ship can tell how far away he is from the shore and where he is in the ocean....This information can only be received properly if someone is on the ship, waiting to see that brilliant flash that lights up the storm. If no one is watching the light, then it is possible that the ship will run aground--total lack of communication.

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Another way I approach an assignment is by discussing first an issue, a problem, a concept and by then asking students to deal with that issue by using an image as the origin and center of their entire composition. After discussing oppression, discrimination, or invisibility, for instance, I ask them to evoke a memory image which illustrates their own experience of feeling oppressed or invisible to others. A student's paper entitled "The Invisible Shield" dealt with her painful frustration at the dinner table as her family thwarted her attempts to share the day's experiences.

> It was during the spring of my eighth year that I first discovered the invisible shield....I remember a particular dinner gathering when it was the first time I really needed to be heard by my family.... I was more demanding in my next attempt and boldly announced my intentions by saying, 'I want to tell you about my report I did today on...' This time my father demanded everyone's attention. While we listened to his plans for the family vacation, I realized the shield was completely up and I sat uncomfortably behind its dense field. I knew what I had to say was important, but I couldn't seem to fight this dominant shield that hid me. I felt disconnected from the world. I wasn't part of reality because I was unnoticed, and, therefore at the moment didn't exist. But the desire to be heard was a strong one and just as I was about to attempt another opening line, my mother asked my sister and me to clear the table. The dinner was over. The shield stayed up.

Needless to say, the effect of "Battle Royal" (the title often used in anthologies for the first chapter of Invisible Man) is intensified after the students have been compelled to look inward. Before reading "Battle Royal," this student narrated an experience somewhat similar to the invisible man's attempt to give his speech to the apathetic,

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cruel crowd. In turn the story can be read by focusing on the opening image of the dying grandfather who shocks everyone with his astonishing confession. "'I have been a traitor all my born days,'" and "the younger children were rushed from the room, the shades drawn and the flame of the lamp turned so low that it sputtered on the wick like the old man's breathing" (16). By showing students how that image is both the origin and the center of the first chapter as well as the entire novel, we can illustrate the germinal, emotional, and unifying qualities of a single image.

Next a discussion of the differences between literary and commercial images, perceiving and imaging (Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader and The Act of Reading) can precede a viewing of an episode of the Bill Cosby show and a close examination of its subtext, again focusing on a critic's image or metaphor describing an aspect of the show. What does Shelby Steele, for instance, mean in The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), when he says that "On Thursday night, Cosby, like a priest, absolves his white viewers, forgives and forgets the sins of the past?" (11)

Another set of assignments can be initiated with a discussion and a personal experience essay on gender roles followed by a close reading of the imagery in Jean Stafford's "A Country Love Story" or John Upkike's "Separating," or D.H. Lawrence's "Two Blue Birds," stories which in turn can be seen through the images of Marilyn

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French's "The Gender Principles," the introductory chapter in her book, Shakespeare's Division of Experience (New York: Summit Books, 1981) or Susan Willis' "Gender As Commodity" (The South Atlantic Review 6 (1987):403-18). Here are some comments from a student's essay on the "Two Blue Birds" seen from Marilyn French's perspective. After seeing Mr. Gee's devoted secretary as embodying what French calls the mother-madonna stereotype, this student goes on to discuss Mrs. Gee's personality:

> Mrs. Gee characterizes the opposite end of the stereotype, that of the outlaw feminine principle. She has 'no goal beyond the pleasure of being' (French, 28). She travels extensively, enjoying 'gallant affairs' with strange men. Her blatant sexuality is an element of the outlaw principle. While Miss Wrexall is the stereotypical 'mother-madonna,' Mrs. Gee could be seen as the 'castrating bitch' (French, 29).... Neither one of these women is truly 'human' according to the Marilyn French definition. They are merely 'types.' They are not presented as individuals and Mr. Gee cannot and does not see them that way.

Such essays can also provide the critical vocabulary with which students are equipped to analyze stereotypes in TV shows like Cheers or Star Trek. In a paper on Cheers seen from Willis' and French's perspectives, a student observed:

> Through Willis' and French's viewpoints, we become aware of the stereotypes in our world that haunt our television screens.... The masculine principle dominates the show. In the opening scene, we see men only at the bar. They sit and guzzle beer while the waitresses serve their drinks.... I was particularly interested in Susan Willis' thoughts on consumption. We, Americans, consume television and are much like those children consumers Wills discusses, who, as she observes, give no thought to the production of toys...

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By encouraging students to evoke perceptual, aesthetic, or memory images as the origins and centers of papers ranging from the personal experience to the argumentative or even critical essay, we may inspire them to cultivate their originality, to authenticate their voice. Simultaneously, we can help them bridge home and academic cultures and show them the path that leads from the private to the public sphere.

I would like to conclude these thoughts with excerpts from an in-class essay on AIDS, entitled "Practice # 34, 276, 428 (And Counting)," beginning with the writer's tennis coach trying to train him to use his backhand.

> Maybe it's sacrilegious, but sometimes I suspect that God (or Mother nature) is a lot like my tennis coach--observant, patient, absolutely aware of our weaknesses in the way we play at life, and relentless in giving us practices so that we may become more human than we dare dream we can. I'm thinking, in other words, that AIDS isn't a dumb virus or a punishment but rather a test that enables us to practice our humanity skills. And to quote my coach, we need plenty of practice....
>
> Of course, we never admit it. We mouth the pro-social words--"Love thy neighbor, turn that cheek" just as I said to my coach, "yeah, I get it. I'll hit my backhand." Fortunately, I couldn't fool my coach. Thanks to his tough practices, I'm a better player.
>
> Likewise, we can't fool God/Nature with words. Talking love is easy. Doing love is tough.... It means straights not being smug when gays start dropping from Aids. It means caring as much for addicts as for ourselves....
>
> Hey, it's not going to be easy. But what choice is there? Looks to me as if God has got a billion times more patience and imagination than any tennis coach. If we don't learn to love when confronted with a calamity like AIDs, there'll be another opportunity down the road, and another and another. Sooner or later we'll master the lesson. For God's sake--or, rather for ours--I hope it's sooner.
>
> Tennis anyone? Love anyone?

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